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Mental health among migrant workers due to pandemic lockdown

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Abstract

The pandemic has exposed that gains made to address poverty, hunger, good health and well-being may face serious setbacks, unless the global community also urgently addresses the global environment threats that have similar capacity to gravely undermine the systems that enable humanity and the planet to survive the thrive.

As COVID 19 pandemic continues to have widespread impacts on workforces globally, migrant workers are among those withstanding the worst of the crisis. Due to pandemic situation, migrant workers lost their job, shelter and most importantly, they are in psychological stress, which is hampering their mental health. This current crisis of forced displacement is posing serious humanitarian and developmental challenge that cannot ignore. Mental, neurological and substance use disorders (MNS), often as “invisible” and “hidden” problems, are assuming alarming proportion, contributing significantly to the disease burden among migrant workers and pushing them traumatic condition.

Keywords: Migrant workers, COVID 19, pandemic, mental health, trauma, pre-flight, fight and resettlement phase, sustainable goals

Introduction

“The global coronavirus pandemic, which has already caused unimaginable devastation and hardship, has brought our way of life to an almost complete halt. The outbreak will have profound and lasting economic and social consequences in every corner of the globe”. – United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

The pandemic has exposed that gains made to address poverty, hunger, good health and well-being may face serious setbacks, unless the global community also urgently addresses the global environment threats that have similar capacity to gravely undermine the systems that enable humanity and the planet to survive the thrive.

Followings are some tragic headline from newspapers recently published:

1. “Miseries of migrant labourers worsen amid coronavirus pandemic and lockdown”- 11th April, 2020, Economic Times
 - A group of migrant labourers stuck in an under construction building in Delhi, with dwindling supplies, little money and creeping panic, represents a microcosm of the crisis of deprivation playing out across India.
2. “Delhi draws up list of these to be sent home: Delhi has one of the largest concentration of migrant workers in the country” 6 May 2020. The Indian Express
 - A list of about 5000 migrant workers hailing from Rajasthan has been drawn up, with an average of 300- 500 people from the state having been enlisted across all district
3. India coronavirus lockdown: Migrant workers and their long march to uncertainty” 4 April 2020, The Hindu.
4. “96% migrant workers did not get rations from the government, 90% did not receive wages during lockdown” – 20th April 2020, The Hindu
5. “Coronavirus in India : Desperate migrant workers trapped in lockdown”- 21st April 2020, BBC News
6. ÜP to bring back migrant workers from other states in Phases”- 24th April 2020
7. “Coronavirus : Anger as migrants sprayed with disinfectant in India”- 31st March 2020, BBC News

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In light of the above news items, the traumatic plight of migrant workers is cause enough for serious concern. The entire world today is suffering due to the Covid - 19 pandemic. However, the problems of migrant workers known no bounds. They are enormously poor. They are below the poverty line. Now they have lost their job. They have no food, no shelter, and no money. They want to return to their home, but there is no transport to help them get back. Naturally, their mental health is in danger. As the Covid – 19 pandemic continues to have a widespread impact on the workforce globally, migrant workers are among those withstanding the worst of the crisis. They are disappointedly at risk from the impact of pandemic, due to inadequate and crowded living conditions, lockdowns and harsh containment measures, limited access to healthcare and basic service, poor working conditions and an exploitative labour system.

Migrant workers are persons who migrate either within their home country or outside it to pursue work. They usually do not have the intention to stay permanently in the country or region in which they work.

Current scenario or migrant workers in India

Reasons for migration

Work/ Employment	14.4 million (14.7%)
Business	1.1 million (1.2%)
Education	2.9 million (3.0%)
Marriage	43.1 million (43.8%)
Moved after birth	6.5 million (6.7%)
Moved with household	20.6 million (21.0%)
Others	9.5 million (9.7%)
Total migrants by last residence	98.3 million

Thus, we see that the most important reason for migration was work / Employment. Our focus area is on their mental health.

Mental health of migrant worker in pandemic situation

Due to pandemic situation, migrant workers have lost their job and shelter. Most of all, they are in psychological stress which is hampering their mental health. This current crisis of forced displacement is posing serious humanitarian and developmental challenge that cannot ignored. They want to return their homes. A home is a place where we feel warm and cosy. We have thing around us that are special and have meaning. Family who loves us surrounds us. However, lockdown made it difficult for these workers to be with their families. Their need for attachment is frustrated made them more likely to suffer from severe feelings of loneliness. This can be lead to the development of a depression disorder.

Mental health is an integral part of our health. However, has received inadequate attention. Despite their enormous social burden, mental disorders continue to be driven into the shadows by stigma, prejudice, fear of disclosing an affliction because loss of job and basic needs. Mental disorders tend to be more acute and often unattended in conflict and post conflict situations where vast segment of the population have lived through long periods of pandemic situation due to COVID - 19.

Mental, neurological and substance use disorders (MNS), often as “invisible” and “hidden” problem, contribute to a significant proportion of disease burden and an increasing obstacle. It push them to traumatic situation. Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinary stressful events that shatter their sense of security, making them feel helpless in a dangerous situation. Psychological trauma can leave them struggling with upsetting emotions, memories and

anxiety that will not go away. It can also leave us feeling numb, disconnected and unable to trust other people.

Now days, traumatic pandemic situation often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves them feeling overwhelmed and isolated can result in trauma. This is not the situation to counselling them about trauma. They have to identify themselves.

Followings are the emotional and psychological symptoms of trauma

- Shock or denial or disbelief
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Anxiety and fear
- Guilt, shame and self-blame
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling sad and hopeless
- Feeling disconnected or numb

Followings are physical symptoms of trauma

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Fatigue
- Being started easily
- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing heartbeat
- Edginess and agitation
- Aches and pains
- Muscle tension

Analysis of the Problem

Somehow, psychology of migrant workers may be similar with displaced populations and refugees. Traditionally the refugee experience is divided into 3 categories:

Pre-flight phase may include losses of family members, livelihood and belonging paired with possibly physical and emotional trauma to the individual or family etc. whereas migrant workers experience in displacement.

Flight involves an uncertain journey from the host country or states to the resettlement site and may involve arduous travel, refugee camps and detention canthers, often involving further losses and traumatic stressors. Because of pandemic situation, migrant workers were feeling the same situation.

The *resettlement* process includes challenges such as the loss of culture, community and language as well as the need to adopt to a new and foreign environment. However, in the case of migrant works there is no resettlement but only struggle.

The more common mental health diagnoses associated with migrant workers are emotional disorders, such as depressive and anxiety disorders, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety, panic attacks adjustment disorder and somatization.

PTSD is a disorder characterised by failure of recover after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. The condition may lost months or years, with triggers that can bring back memories of the trauma accompanied by intense emotional and physical reactions.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterised by excessive, exaggerated anxiety and worry about worry. People with symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder tend to always expect disaster and cannot stop worrying about health, money, family, work or school.

Panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear or anxiety and physical symptoms, based on a perceived threat rather than imminent danger.

Adjustment disorder is a group of symptoms such as stress, feeling sad and hopeless, and physical symptoms that can occur after us go through a stressful life event. The symptoms occurs because we are having a hard time coping. Our reaction is stronger than expected for the type of event that occurred.

Somatization is a tendency to experience and communicate psychological distress in the form of somatic symptoms and to seek medical help for them. More commonly expressed, it is the generation of physical symptoms of a psychiatric condition such as anxiety.

Conclusion

Both, mental health and psychosocial interventions and programmes can improve economic, social and human development and strengthen health systems. Replacement, shelter, proper food by State and Central Government for migrant workers with significant returns in terms of health and economic gains of the country. An increased focus on mental health and psychosocial programme implementation is consistent with their inclusion in Sustainable Development Goals 3 to ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages.

According to WHO, SDG 3.c – substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and Small Island developing States.

3.d States that strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks. The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare proposed ways in which migrant workers can be provided “psycho-social” support amid a spike in Covid-19 cases in the country. This came a day after the Supreme Court directed the Centre to ensure the well-being of migrant workers struggling to return home amid the nationwide lockdown due to coronavirus. The statement was “Immediate concerns faced by such migrant workers related to food, shelter, and healthcare, fear of getting infected or spreading the infection, loss of wages, concerns about the family, anxiety and fear. Sometimes, they also face harassment and negative reactions of the local community. All this calls for strong social protection”.

Stress wreaks havoc on our emotional equilibrium, as well as our physical health. It narrows our ability to think clearly, function effectively, and enjoy life. It may seem that there’s nothing we can do about stress, but we have a lot more control than we might think. Effective stress management help us break the hold stress has on our life, so we can be happier, healthier and more productive. The ultimate goal is a balanced life and the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

Today’s complex challenges – from stemming the spread of disease to preventing conflict – cannot be solved neatly in isolation. For UNDP, this means focusing on systems, root causes and connections between challenges – not just thematic sectors – to build solutions that respond to people’s daily realities. Empathetic and sympathetic view toward migrant workers required by the partnership of governments, State and private sector, civil society and citizens alike to make sure we leave a better planet for future generations.

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